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George, Ex-CIA Spymaster, Convicted On 2 Charges Tied to Iran-Contra Case

By David Rogers
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WASHINGTON — Clair George, the Central Intelligence Agency's former top spymaster, was convicted of two felony charges of perjury and lying to Congress in 1986 in connection with the Iran-Contra affair.

Mr. George, a CIA veteran who led the agency's operations division through the mid-1980s, was cleared of five related counts, including obstruction of a federal grand jury. But yesterday's verdict is a victory nonetheless for independent prosecutor Lawrence Walsh, who was frustrated last August when a prior trial of Mr. George ended without resolution because of a hung jury.

"Make no mistake about it, we are very pleased with this verdict," said Craig Gillen, the chief prosecutor in the case and Mr. Walsh's deputy. "Word has gone out to senior officials in the intelligence agencies that they cannot use the secrets of our nation to hide."

Appearing outside the federal courthouse minutes later, Mr. George left most of the talking to his attorney, Richard Hibey, but laughed good-naturedly when the defense counsel said a presidential pardon at this juncture would be welcome. The trials have already run up legal bills in excess of $1 million for Mr. George, and the two men said that a decision on any appeal may turn on the defendant's resources.

Stern-faced and clearly disappointed, Mr. Hibey described Mr. Gillen as "the victor" for yesterday at least, but said Mr. George was a "patriot" trapped in a political battle not of his own making. "This is a great man who unfortunately got caught up in the partisan dispute over the wisdom of a certain policy. . .A pardon would definitely be appropriate."

The case represents a rare instance when a senior CIA official has been convicted on felony charges related to his office, and the trials forced the disclosure of previously secret documents related to a covert network run from the White House in the mid-1980s to sustain anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua. Profits from U.S. arms sales to Iran in 1986 were later used to support this supply effort, but the great bulk of the prosecution's case dealt with Mr. George's knowledge of the Contra network, which sought to circumvent a ban on U.S. military aid to the guerrillas.

Press reports through much of 1986 raised questions about White House involvement on behalf of the insurgents, and when a cargo plane was downed in Nicaragua in October, the secret operation began unraveling. The Reagan administration feared that the scandal could lead Congress to reverse its decision to lift the ban on military aid, and in this atmosphere Mr. George found himself as a lead CIA witness before House and Senate Intelligence Committees.

His conviction stems from testimony in October and December of that year, and the prosecution alleged Mr. George lied and perjured himself in trying to hide his knowledge of leading participants in the operation. Among these were retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, who oversaw both the arms sales to Iran and the Contra network, and Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA operative who worked out of a post in El Salvador obtained with the blessing of then-Vice President Bush.

Before the House Intelligence Committee, for example, Rep. Matthew McHugh (D., N.Y.) asked if Mr. George or the other CIA witnesses knew as a matter of fact whether Mr. Rodriguez "was involved in providing supplies to the Contras." Mr. George testified, "I do not know that per se. I do not. Or any record I have ever read." But testimony and documents introduced at the trial showed that CIA officials knew not only about Mr. Rodriguez's role but also his ties to Mr. Bush.

U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth scheduled sentencing for Feb. 18. Each charge carries a maximum five-year prison term and $250,000 fine.